

To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

The Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletin

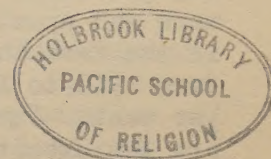
Published by The Christian Rural Fellowship, 156 Fifth Avenue, New York 10, N. Y.

No. 174

June 1952

A Rural Faith for Today

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Where is the "Micah" who will lead the rural church in building a Christian fellowship?

Our country has rapidly become an urban nation. We have been evangelized with a gospel of urbanism which has convinced an increasing number of people in the city and in the rural areas that greatness originates in the city. "If you want to make something of yourself, go to the city" now replaces the advice of Horace Greeley, who said at one time, "Go West, young man, go West."

The rural community has been the native home of American idealism. Not that all idealists have lived in the country, nor have all city folk been cynics, but the family virtues of neighborliness, creativeness, genuine religious fellowship, and democracy have been native rural characteristics. It was no accident that Jesus selected those rural life things like bread, birds, stones, lilies, tares, wheat, sheep, and vineyards to help define the kingdom of heaven.

Our highly industrialized civilization, with its attendant commercialism and bitter conflicts between classes, has taken us all far afield in Christian thought and practice. Our recent Sunday school lessons reveal how compromising we have become. The man with the hoe has little in common with the man on the picket line, and it is easy for the corporation executive to be concerned only with the manufacture, price, and sale of his product. In the rural areas, men still gather face to face in friendly churches or in the town hall or courthouse to map out their own welfare. They are not dependent upon the decisions of their representatives in faraway places.

Woodrow Wilson summed up the rural situation this way, "Nations are renewed from the bottom up, not from the top down.... The real wisdom of life

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is compounded out of the experiences of ordinary men. The utility, vitality, and fruitage of life comes like the growth of a tree -- from the soil up, through the trunk into the foliage and then the fruit." Indeed so! Our denominational faith was originated and nurtured by rural people. Our democratic nation sinks its roots into the rural church, the country school, the New England town hall and the rural home. Untold numbers of our executives in all walks of city life will bear this testimony.

Now allowing for exceptions, there are trends in rural areas which are not only discouraging but demoralizing. One FBI report for the first half of 1949 reveals that rural crime was up 7.5 per cent while urban crime was down 2.3 per cent. In thirteen rural counties of Pennsylvania forty-three per cent more was spent at state liquor stores in 1945 than in 1940. More surprising is the fact that in eleven of these counties the rate of increase of divorce from 1940 to 1945 was 155 per cent, when the increase in the nation was ninety per cent. Juvenile delinquency was on the increase. These references, we hope, are the exceptions. It is true, however, that the former "pillars" of the rural church are passing away. The children have gone to the city in large numbers. After a period of disintegration the old home place is sold to new owners who are seldom assimilated in the life of the rural church. Many a country church has lost its vitality and its mission. The administration has passed from local hands into the hands of boards or faraway elders.

The rural community has a unique disposition toward fellowship, and this fellowship offers a most unusual opportunity to the church. The only remedy for this rural illness in our nation lies in the area of Christian leadership. Our government, with its program of soil conservation, FFA clubs, cattle raising, and farm organizations, has far exceeded the rural church in its meager efforts to meet the spiritual problem. We are not fulfilling our Christian obligation if we become only a "me too" agency in rural sociology. Not that we should be exclusive, but we need to be true to our mission as a leavening agency.

Micah, the preacher prophet of the Old Testament, faced a situation which was in some ways similar to ours. The Hebrew nation began as an agricultural nation, so did ours. The rise of commercialism and its attendant evils in Hebrew history was similar to ours. In one superb sentence he declares, "He hath showed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" Micah was not too optimistic. There is no evidence that he considered his role as an easy one. Suffering and trouble seemed inevitable. Micah declared that his work and the work of his people was to be the work of a minority. The gospel had to be preached; sins had to be renounced; suffering had to be borne before a sounder morality would appear. Is there any other way?

A vital religion always helps us to see our problems. Doing justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God make us conscious of our own shortcomings and those of our community. Many rural areas of America have rocked along for years with such a passive, lukewarm brand of Christianity that those social evils have grown up without being recognized at all. Many do not know what is going on. The trumpet of the Lord must sound with no uncertain note! But how shall they hear without a preacher of passion and vision? Someone has wisely said, "Rural America is becoming our mission field."

Micah's brand of preaching helps us to want to solve these problems.

Only a vital faith can make us "want to do." Any number of people have analyzed the situation; they discuss at length ways and means of procedure; but the comparatively few communities which are at work are led by men with a vision similar to Micah's.

Micah was just as modern in his analysis of the situation and in his appreciation of the minority, as is our modern historian, Arnold Toynbee. He has said, too, that civilization is led through difficult times by a "creative minority." How often we crave numbers and more numbers. Can it be that the people of rural areas are called to be the "creative minority" or the remnant which will lead the way to overcome the evil effects of commercialism and class distinctions?

Our nation needs the influence of the simple wholesome life of the country. It needs the character of the rural type of fellowship. By its geographical location, the rural church has the opportunity to bring together all who live in the community -- the rich, the poor; the tenant, the landlord; those of other faiths. The challenge of welding these together into a Christian fellowship is difficult but most challenging. Where is there any greater opportunity to build Jesus' conception of the kingdom of God?

How may this "creative minority" make itself known and how may it become influential? By recognizing that the good earth is of God; he made it and not we ourselves. Since the time of creation, when man was given dominion over the earth, those who have worked the soil have had the privilege and the opportunity to become the custodians and the preferred stockholders in the kingdom of God. Soil that has been "subdued" and made to yield thirty, forty, and some a hundredfold has ever been of more use to the world than all the manufactured wealth. Of what use are gadgets, pearl necklaces, and technological appliances if there is no food? The bread basket of the world must always be filled by the tiller of the soil. The speculator who misuses God's good earth, who depletes the soil to enrich himself, has sinned against God and his fellow man. Instead of capitalizing on God's gift, he has robbed the soil of its potential reproductive power and has used it to enrich himself.

It follows then that the custodian of the soil has an inherent responsibility to God and to his fellow men to use it for human welfare and to the glory of God. Those who are close to the soil may find easily accessible pathways to the reality of God, since God is the source of birth and of growth and of reproduction. The song of the birds, the music of the brooks, a clover field in full bloom, or the fragrance of new mown hay is nearer to the Omnipotent than the clang of street car bells or the noise of the subway or the honking of horns when the light turns green.

What an opportunity for the rural church to teach this gospel! What an opportunity to experiment in the building of a fellowship of country people and trying to weld them into a Christian community. Here is a new frontier for the church. By inheritance and by tradition, we hark back to the country. Shall we grow wheat or tares?

How our minds kindle when we think of Augustine, St. Francis, the Waldensians, Huss, Luther, Calvin, John Frederic Oberlin, the Wesleys, George Fox, Alexander Mack! These brought the gospel to bear on the countrysides of the world!

Here is a new frontier for the church, indeed. Where is the "Micah" who will lead the rural church in building a Christian fellowship?

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